

The Eve of the Nativity of Our Lord

24 December, Anno Domini 2024

1 John 4:7-16

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

Brothers and sisters in Christ,

People talk a lot about love but most of them are clueless as to what that actually means and, consequently, they actually end up hurting themselves and others in the name of love. They are confused. They don't know, perhaps because no one has told them, what love actually is. "In this is love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins." Love is concrete. Love sacrifices. It's not a nebulous feeling. It isn't the pleasure that we derive from another person. Love is first what God does. Love has form - the form of a servant born in the usual way to a very usual young woman. God's love began in his mother's womb and was human from the day He was conceived just as you and I were. God's love has fingers and toes like you and me. God's love nurses at his mother's breast and needs his diapers changed. God's love knew hunger and sadness and pain. He suffered circumcision and celebrated the Passover. He went to the synagogue and heard the Word of His Father. He submitted to His earthly parents.

The infant Jesus was like you in every way but one - He knew no sin. Though He was tempted in every way you are, He never strayed in thought, word, or deed from His Father's Word. He loved His Father and the will of His Father was His only concern. That's what loving God looks like. And it was the will of the Father to be with you, to be Immanuel. That was the Father's will from the beginning, when He first created the heavens and the earth and man, the crown of creation. That was the true paradise, the true life, to walk in perfect harmony with God, to gladly be His creatures, dependent upon Him for all things, and to receive His Word in unadulterated faith. When God created man, He gave man something no

other part of creation had - the Holy Spirit.

But that relationship was severed when Adam and Eve and all humanity with them rejected God by rejecting His Word. They spurned the Holy Spirit. They took what was forbidden them and so acted in hatred toward God. They didn't want God to be with them, that was no longer enough. They wanted to be God. They believed the lie that being His creatures was somehow insufficient, that they had been denied something owed to them, that they could be more than what they were if they only lived as they saw fit. But they couldn't. They traded all that they had from God for death and pain and suffering. And thus, in our rebellion, we were driven out of God's presence. And we have suffered the consequences ever since.

A rejection of God and our union with Him has also meant a rejection of our union with one another. Love and selflessness are no longer the order of the day. Instead, it is hatred, selfishness, and greed. Our neighbor is now our stepping stone, our competition in a zero-sum quest for attention, pride, praise, and wealth. Love didn't win in the Garden and the world has grown increasingly loveless ever since. Cain's murder of Abel was only the first in a long line of murderous attacks. Man's love failed. The poorest and weakest among us are trampled underfoot as obstacles on our way to happiness. We do not want to be troubled by other's weaknesses and pains. We do not want to be patient. Children are viewed as inconvenient commodities to be bought, sold, and destroyed at will. Women are treated as sexual objects useful only insofar as they are attractive and pleasing to men. Marriage is scorned as outdated and misogynistic. People languish alone and unnoticed in the dark shadows of depression, anxiety, fear and hopelessness. We take pleasure in the pain and suffering of others, even calling it entertainment. Where is the love in any of that? There isn't. Among us, love has lost.

The world and our sinful nature are completely blinded to what real love is. It believes love is little more than a momentary feeling of pleasure that I get from someone or something else. The source doesn't matter - a person, an object, an emotion. So long as I feel good about it it must be love. In which case, I can define love in any way that is pleasing to me. Man's "love" no longer has any

other purpose or direction than back to himself. And we can't even love ourselves. Our desires are against our good. Our sinful flesh desires only that which serves to finally destroy us and condemn us.

True love, on the other hand is always directed outward toward another and is driven to the other's good. True love isn't defensive or reflexive. It is creative. It seeks an object on which to bestow itself but not because it gains something from it. Only because it wants to give itself. In the Ten Commandments God gives us the definition of love. But notice that none of the commandments are about the self. They are about the other, the neighbor. They are about how we are ordered in relationship to God, how we are to love Him, and how we are ordered in relationship to our neighbor, how we are to love him. And how woefully short we have fallen. Every day we struggle against the inborn desire to fight for our own interests and desires, to benefit ourselves and protect ourselves from the needs and well-being of others. Consider just how impossible the commandments seem - to not only never do harm to our neighbor but always, in every way, at any cost, to seek his benefit and good. This should be simple because it is how we were made to be. But it is impossible because we are sinners. And that fact is a clear demonstration of our lost and condemned condition, that we are not good and that we do not love.

And though sinful man is incapable of this love, God is not. This true, pure, selfless love is exactly who God is. His steadfast love, rather than failing, endureth forever. And in the Christ child, the God who created us so that He might give Himself to us, still reaches out to love us. He still desires to give us life though we have turned away from Him in hatred and embraced death. The infant child of Bethlehem, though conceived by a divine miracle, grew in the womb, was born, and lived just as you and I and every other man, woman, and child. God's only Son, became Mary's only Son and your brother to do what we couldn't - to love and to be the love of the Father for us. He isn't just a demonstration of love so that you now know what to do. Rather, Jesus is the love of the Father sent from heaven to keep the divine Law of love both actively and passively and by so doing, save you from the death which your lovelessness demands.

Actively, Jesus gladly honored and obeyed His parents (as flawed as they were), gladly heard and learned and believed the Word of God without a shred of doubt even in His death, gladly loved His neighbor and alleviated His neighbor's burden. The Lord Jesus never coveted what wasn't given Him. He never used His neighbor for His own purposes. He never withheld the saving truth from His neighbor no matter how much His neighbor hated Him. He poured out every blessing He had to give. And all of that He did in your place, for you. He gained nothing from it. And then passively, He allowed the Law to condemn Him as guilty of your sins, of your lovelessness. He suffered the very death we had chosen in our sin. And all so that He could perfectly keep the Law - to love and by so loving give us life once again, His life. His flesh and blood were condemned to death so that your flesh and blood would be redeemed from death. He gave up His life so that it might be given to you.

And in this way it is true, love wins. God's love for you wins. God's love, found in Christ and nowhere else, has won the victory over sin and death. God's love which first entered our fallen world in the manger came to full expression stretched out upon the cross, as God offered His only-begotten Son to be the propitiation, the satisfaction, for our loveless deeds. It is this love that has gathered us here tonight, because God is still Immanuel. He is still God with us to save us. God desires that all men know and are made alive by His love and thus He causes Christ to be proclaimed to the ends of the earth. It is His love, which gave birth to you in the waters of Holy Baptism, which washes you clean of all your sins, that gives hope in the darkness of this loveless and dying world. And that love is still concrete and tangible even today, as the very Body and Blood that once laid in the manger as a lowly baby, now lay veiled in lowly bread and wine, which we will feast on again tomorrow morning, so that we might know the Father's love.

You, dear Christian, have been drawn into God's redeeming and life-giving love. You have been saved from a life wasted on selfish ambition and preservation. By the power of the Holy Spirit, you have tasted and seen the goodness and loving-kindness of God your Savior, and are now free to love as your heavenly Father

loves you, to bear your neighbor's burden and seek only his good. You can now see the blessing in the Commandments and that in keeping them there is great joy. There is no good that has been withheld from you. You have been given Jesus, the Son of God, the Son of Mary, by whom and through whom the love of God has won the victory over sin and death, over the darkness and hopelessness of this broken world, over every disease and affliction that plagues mankind, for you. May you always abide in this love, that God Himself may abide in you.

In the Name of +Jesus.

Pastor Ulmer

(We stand.) The peace of God which passes all understanding keep you hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus our Lord.